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Deadly Serious Spy Thillers

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When we are all dead and our great-grandchildren are writing dissertations on the 20th Century, I suspect they will regard our spy thrillers as a serious and very important part of our literature. Precisely because they are immensely popular, they carry weight as evidence of the current view of the world.

Throughout most of its long history the spy novel has been a story about the combat between Good and Evil, with the Good side of course usually being us Americans and British, and the Other side being mainly the Germans and Russians, with occasional reference to the Yellow Peril.

The passage to a more ambiguous world of literary espionage began about a generation ago, with the early books of Eric Ambler. He wrote about the kind of people whom literary critics later came to call anti-heroes: not entirely respectable people caught, involuntarily, in the midst of massive conspiracies that they came to understand only far too late.

After World War II, Ambler began to lose interest in massive international conspiracies, or perhaps to lose faith in them, and began writing about the affairs of ingenious but not wholly likeable crooks.

Ambler deserves to be considered a major novelist by any standard; had he chosen another subject, he would no doubt have been installed long since in the required reading lists for college English majors. His newest book, "The Intercom Conspiracy," returns to international intelligence, but with several highly interesting differences.

Two elderly colonels in the intelligence services of small NATO countries purchase a wretched little right-wing newsletter to create a market for their stock in trade. Their purpose is simply to provide for their old age (not mind you, to build great manic pirate empires or conquer the world; it is very bourgeois). The man who edits the newsletter, "Intercom," finds himself printing incomprehensible little paragraphs that draw the most intense interest of both CIA and KGB, who want to shut him up at any price.

Ambler is not writing about the tug-of-war between virtue and evil. He is writing about small people struggling for survival in the cracks between the massive organizations that mainly run the world. The book is more than mere amusement.

During the 1940s the World War dominated most spy writing; during the 1950s, it was all the Cold War. But now, at the end of the 1960s, the Ambler view is spreading very rapidly among the minor practitioners of the craft. The four other books under review here are a fairly representative choice of the current product.

By far the best of the four is Richard Frede's "Coming Out Party," in which the central figure is a young writer incapable of writing under his own name and deeply in debt to his publisher for advances on unfinished books. To pay his debts he signs on for a covert operation for which he is mysteriously trained in a snow-bound ski lodge. To his horror he finds himself forced to play the double agent between the equally repellant secret forces of the U.S. and Russia.

Shaun Herron's "Miro" is again the story of a veteran CIA agent whose superiors coolly reveal his identity (without his knowledge) to the other side, a Canadian drug-and-terrorism ring, deliberately sacrificing him merely as a tactical move.

Philip Wylie once again manages to combine his interest in fish with the going thing at the lending libraries. In "The Spy Who Spoke Porpoise," it all has to do with a President who discovers that the CIA is involved in operations of a sinister character that it refuses to reveal to him. The quality of the writing is not up to Wylie's usual.

Arthur Arent's "The Laying on of Hands" involves some American theatrical people who tangle with a conspiracy of very wicked Nazis who have been ruralized all this time in Latin America. The scene is mostly Spain, the idiom is a flip Newyorkese, the style is tough-sentimental, and the cliche quotient is unforgiveable.

THE INTERCOM CONSPIRACY
By Eric Ambler. Atheneum. 241 pp. $5.95.

COMING OUT PARTY
By Richard Frede. Random House. 237 pp. $5.95

MIRO
By Shaun Herron. Random House. 213 pp. $4.95

THE SPY WHO SPOKE PORPOISE
By Philip Wylie. Doubleday. 312 pp. $5.95

THE LAYING ON OF HANDS
By Arthur Arent. Little, Brown. 273 pp. $5.95